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THE EFFECT OF PURPOSEFUL READING ON COMPREHENSION AT DIFFERING LEVELS OF DIFFICULTY.

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A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE RELEVANT TO THE PROBLEM OF PURPOSEFUL READING AND COMPREHENSION REVEALS THE NEED TO HELP CHILDREN ESTABLISH A MENTAL SET OR PURPOSEFUL ATTITUDE PRIOR TO READING. TO EVALUATE A THOUGHT-DIRECTING QUESTION AS A PURPOSE PRIOR TO READING AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF DIFFICULTY, 279 SIXTH GRADERS FROM THREE SCHOOLS IN HAMMOND, INDIANA, WERE RANDOMLY ASSIGNED TO AN EXPERIMENTAL AND A CONTROL GROUP. BOTH GROUPS WERE SUBDIVIDED INTO ABOVE-AVERAGE READERS, AVERAGE READERS, AND BELOW-AVERAGE READERS ON THE BASIS OF SCORES ON THE IOWA TESTS OF BASIC SKILLS. BOTH GROUPS ALSO READ AN ARTICLE FROM "JUNIOR SCHOLASTIC MAGAZINE." THE EXPERIMENTAL GROUP WAS GIVEN A BROAD THOUGHT-DIRECTING QUESTION BEFORE READING THE SELECTION, WHILE THE CONTROL GROUP WAS TOLD THAT THERE WOULD BE QUESTIONS AFTER THEY HAD READ THE SELECTION. A FOLLOWUP TEST OF 10 MULTIPLE-CHOICE ITEMS WAS GIVEN TO BOTH GROUPS. AN ANALYSIS OF TEST RESULTS SHOWED THAT A BROAD THOUGHT-DIRECTING QUESTION WAS OF SPECIAL VALUE IN COMPREHENDING MATERIAL THAT APPROXIMATED THE READING LEVEL OF THE READER, BUT WAS NOT VALUABLE WHEN THE MATERIAL WAS TO DIFFICULT OR TOO EASY FOR THE READER. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE (SEATTLE, MAY 4-6, 1967). (NS)

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Although the literature generally supports the practice of establishing a purpose before reading, comparatively few studies have been done in an attempt to support this practice. Some of the studies which have been conducted provide only partial support. Unquestionably, it is believed by most writers in the field that it is highly important for the reader to establish a purpose for reading before he begins to read. Educators have long insisted that proper motivation and mind-set are influential factors in learning. In expressing this point of view Schubert states, "Too many students are looking for nothing when they read, and end up with it. Seek and thou shalt find seems to be apropos." (6)

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Nearly twenty years ago Gray declared, "Very little had been done to determine the patterns of guidance that are most effective in reading for different purposes." (2) Emperical evidence related to the establishment of purpose, and the most effective means of creating an appropriate mind-set among children, needs to be compiled.

Observation and inquiry reveal that many college and university freshmen have never learned to establish a purpose for reading other than the shallow purpose of reading to see what is said. Most students of this type are merely compliant and read without seeking understanding. They realize that they are expected to do the reading, and in their way they do so. Their efforts, however, amount only to hoping that they understand, but do not constitute real effort to understand.

Shores (5) reported a study in Elementary English in which he found that pupils need help in recognizing the requirements of reading and need practice in adjusting their reading rates and techniques to their purposes. While Shores was primarily concerned with reading for different purposes, and as Gray (2) had suggested, also recommended carrying out emperical and analytical studies of what is involved in ability to read for various purposes.

In an earlier study, Holmes (3) used college students in an effort to determine the comprehension levels of reading when guided by questions, as opposed to careful reading and rereading without questions. The results of her study indicated

that guiding questions significantly increased reading ability in both immediate and delayed recall of the answers to the questions used. There was no loss in delayed recall of answers to supplementary questions.

In a 1927 study Distad, studying a group of sixth-grade pupils, concluded that, "If the purpose is to measure the immediate recall on the *entire content** of a selection after a single reading, it appears doubtful whether a wide variety of purposes for reading, directing attention to the content, can be justified in view of the relatively large amount of time required for reading." He further concluded, however, that it is valuable to read with a problem or questions in mind. When *definite information** is desired, and when thus used, "directed types of reading are intrinsically worthwhile in that they develop habits of reading effectively for different purposes." (1) Tinker and McCullough (2) define the efficient reader as one who comprehends just what is required by whatever purpose he has in reading, rather than the one who comprehends the most details.

In working with a group of college students, Letson (4) found that when the students were asked to read for complete mastery of a passage, alertness was engendered above normal. He said that such a mental set made the reader capable of reading with greater comprehension and speed. This study seems to attest to the importance of the mental set or purposeful attitude upon the part of the reader. The problem

* Italics provided by present writer

in part, then, seems to be one of helping children establish a mental set before they begin their reading either in the content areas or in recreational reading.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to make an appraisal of the value of providing pupils with a broad general thought-directing question prior to reading at different levels of difficulty. In other words, what is the value of a broad thought-directing question to the above average reader, the average reader, and the below average reader? The above average reader was considered to be one who read more than a year above his grade placement; the average reader, one who read on a level within a range of one year below and one year above his grade placement; and the below average reader, one who read more than a year below his grade placement.

Design of the Study

This experimental study involved 279 sixth-grade pupils from ten classrooms in three different schools in Hammond, Indiana. The children in each classroom had been grouped heterogeneously. Through a random selection of classrooms, the pupils in half of the classrooms in each school became the subjects of the experimental group (Group A) while the children in the remaining classrooms formed the control group (Group B).

Both Group A and Group B pupils were further subdivided into above average readers, average readers, and below average

readers on the basis of approximate reading levels. For this puppose the Reading Subtest of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, Form 2, was used. In the few cases where the grade equivalent scores could not be obtained, the pupils were eliminated from consideration in the study. The breakdown into the subgroups within Groups A and B was accomplished by placing all pupils who read more than one year below grade level into Sub-Group I. All Sub-Group I pupils had grade-equivalent scores of 5.1 or lower. Sub-Group II pupils had grade-equivalent scores which ranged from 5.2 through 7.1. All Sub-Group II pupils may be thought of as those who were to read on a level approximating their grade placement. Sub-Group III was made up of pupils reading well above the average, and who had earned a grade-equivalent score of 7.2 or above on the test.

As a result of grouping in this manner it was found that the mean grade-equivalents for Group A (6.7) and Group B (6.6) were comparable. Since the mean scores showed that there was only one month difference between the average reading abilities of the members of the experimental group and the control group used in the study, it was thought that these pupils represented a good random sampling.

The pupils in both groups were asked to read an article entitled, "The Swiss Government", which was taken from the Junior Scholastic Magazine. The content of this article was judged to be appropriate for the average sixth-grade pupil. Each of the various subgroups of Group A, the experimental group, was given a broad thought-directing question prior to

reading the article. They were informed that they were to answer some questions after the reading. The broad question was: "In what ways is Switzerland's government like our own and in what ways is it different?" After the test, ten follow-up questions of the multiple choice type were given. Whereas the pupils in Group A were given the broad thought-directing question before reading, the children in Group B were told only that they would be asked to answer the questions after the reading.

The mean score on the multiple-choice test was obtained for each sub-group of Groups A and B. After making a comparison of the sub-group mean scores, the total scores for Groups A and B were compared.

Analysis of the Data

In examining the data obtained from this study it was found that the mean of the scores on the test for the experimental group was six points higher than the mean of the scores for the control group. Examination of the mean scores from the three separate schools involved in the study showed a consistent pattern of increased comprehension for the pupils in the experimental group. The t-test was then applied in an attempt to ascertain whether or not the differences in the mean of the two groups was statistically significant. Upon the application of this test it was found that this difference was significant at a level exceeding the five per cent level of confidence.

Examination of the data for sub-group I of Group A, the poorest readers, reveals that these pupils not only did not improve in comprehension when presented with the broad thought-directing question, but actually did not comprehend as well. The fact that these pupils probably were reading on the frustration level may well be of some particular significance in this instance.

A comparison of the data from sub-groups II of both Groups A and B reveals that there was a mean difference of eleven points in favor of the experimental sub-group. These groups represent the average readers for whom sixth grade material is very likely on their instructional level. These two sub-groups represented the largest of the population groups. When the t-test was applied to the eleven point difference in the mean performance, the results indicated a significant difference at the two per cent level of confidence. This seems to attest to the value of the thought-directing question when material is at an average level of difficulty.

Analysis of the results of testing sub-groups III, the above average readers, reveals that the difference between the mean performance of the experimental sub-group and the control sub-group was only three points, with the difference favoring the experimental group. This difference was not significant at the five per cent level.

Since the sub-group III pupils were able to read more than a year above the level of difficulty of the material read, it is likely that this material was easy enough to be

referred to as independent level material.

Summary and Conclusions

A thoughtful analysis of the results of the test seems to indicate that in general a broad thought-directing question before reading is of value as far as comprehension is concerned. But, as was shown by some of the earlier studies, there are some qualifying conditions. Apparently when pupils read on an easy level, a level some might describe as the independent or free-reading level, the thought-directing question is of very little value. In this instance, these readers probably formulate their own puppose for reading. Perhaps the material is just so easy that the thought-directing question is superfluous.

For pupils who read material at or near their instructional level, a level at which some help may be needed (the teaching level) the thought-directing question seemed to be significantly valuable. Apparently the thought-directing question gave enough mind-set to enable the pupils to comprehend better. It was quite clear that this group obtained better comprehension as a result of the question.

The pupils who read well below the level of difficulty of the material to be read, were not aided in comprehension by the provision of a thought-directing question. The broad question appeared to affect comprehension adversely. This finding is somewhat in line with earlier studies where a number of questions were used, rather than a single broad

question. It should be remembered that these pupils probably were reading on the frustration level, and the question served only to add to their confusion.

In an attempt at a broad interpretation of the findings of this study, it seems that three discreet conclusions may be drawn, namely:

1. A broad thought-directing question may not contribute significantly toward better comprehension when the material is of a low level of difficulty for the particular reader.

2. In general, the broad thought-directing question is of value in comprehending material that is near the instructional level of difficulty for the reader.

3. When the material to be read is on the frustration level, a thought-directing question to give mind-set, is of no value.

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